
A Political History of Alberta

Rod Scarlett

Alberta, named in honour of Princess Louise Caroline Alberta, the fourth daughter of Queen Victoria, was originally, one of the four districts that made up the North-West Territories. Although it has only been a province since 1905, two of its oldest settlements, Fort Vermilion and Fort Chipewyan, celebrated their bicentennials last year. This article which outlines some of the major events in Alberta's political history was prepared for the 29th Conference of the Canadian Region of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, to be held in Calgary and Edmonton from July 12 to 17 1989.

Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, fur trading companies notably the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company were the source of authority in the west, which was populated primarily by native Indians and Métis who were engaged in the fur trade. Gradually central Canada began to show interest in the west and in particular how it should relate to Upper Canada. Still, prior to 1867 little was or could be done for the North-West Territories.

Confederation established the constitutional framework within which the west would eventually take its place as part of the new federation. One of the first acts of the new Dominion government was to negotiate the transfer to Canada of Rupert's Land and the North-West Territories from the Hudson's Bay Company. This process was initiated in 1868 and completed in 1869.

Canada passed *An Act for the temporary Government of Rupert's Land and the North-West Territories when united with Canada* in preparation for the transfer. This brief Act outlined the so-called "temporary arrangement" of government that would more or less provide the basis of government in the North-West Territories until 1905.

Territorial Government

The acquisition of Rupert's Land and the North West Territories left Canada responsible for a very large area. The Act that set up the territorial government provided for the appointment of a Lieutenant Governor who would be responsible for local administration yet would receive instructions from Ottawa. Provision was also made for a

Council, consisting of not more than fifteen nor less than seven persons, to assist the Lieutenant Governor in administrative matters.

Sir John A. Macdonald selected Joseph Howe, an opponent of the acquisition of the North-West, as the cabinet member responsible for the general administration of North-West affairs. William McDougall, then Minister of Public Works, was the choice for Lieutenant Governor. McDougall, a long-time advocate of western expansion, set out for Winnipeg in September 1869 with the intention of setting up the territorial council as soon as possible.

His arrival provided the spark for the Red River uprising and the creation of the province of Manitoba, a story that has been well documented elsewhere. The impact of the uprising had consequences for the rest of the North West as well. Under McDougall's guidance the territorial headquarters moved from Winnipeg to Livingston to Battleford. The *North-West Territories Act of 1875* made provision for a separate Lieutenant Governor and Council as well as adopting a formula whereby for every 1,000 men per 1,000 square miles an electoral district would be proclaimed. When the number of elected Members reached 21, the Council would be disbanded and the elected Members would be given the designation "Members of the Legislative Assembly". It was not until 1883 that the District of Edmonton became an electoral district and Frank Oliver, the editor of the *Edmonton Bulletin*, was elected as Alberta's first representative.

The *Dominion Land Act of 1872* provided homesteaders the opportunity to acquire a free quarter section of land resulting in gradual western expansion. In the mid-1870s, Fort Edmonton and Fort Calgary were established by the North West Mounted Police. By 1881 the population of Alberta consisted of about 6,000 native Indians and fifteen hundred whites and Métis.

Rod Scarlett is Executive Assistant to the Speaker of the Alberta Legislative Assembly.

The Canadian Pacific Railway's westward progress and the availability of land resulted in an influx of pioneers. Commercial ranching, particularly in southern Alberta, soon began to show economic viability. By 1884 Ottawa reported that 47 ranches had leased 1,785,690 acres; of these, such ranches as the Cochrane Ranch Company, the North West Cattle Company, the Cypress Cattle Company, and Oxley and Maunsell grew to become international success stories.

By 1888 elected Members outnumbered appointed Members and the North-West Territories Legislative Assembly was born. Twenty-two Members were elected that year, seven from Alberta including the man who was soon to become the Premier, F.W.G. Haultain..

A worldwide depression in the late 1800s slowed down the incoming wave of settlers. By 1890 CPR crews were beginning to lay the track that was to connect Calgary with Edmonton. Calgary had become the dominant commercial centre in Alberta, and it really was not until 1897, a result of the Yukon Gold Rush, that Edmonton caught up to its southern rival.

The period from 1885 to 1897 was a time of struggle between the North West Territorial Council and Legislative Assembly and Ottawa over control of the purse strings. In 1891 the Dominion Parliament succumbed and passed an amendment to the *North-West Territories Act* allowing the Legislative Assembly to make ordinances covering virtually all matters that were granted to the provinces in the *BNA Act*, except the authority to borrowing money.

In 1891, F.W.G. Haultain was appointed Premier and the battle for a fully responsible government was initiated. Two successive executive councils resigned over this issue and in 1897 a responsible government was formally approved by Ottawa. The push for provincial status now began in earnest. By 1901, Alberta, with its population of 73,022, was ready to step into the twentieth century with a positive view to the future.

The Formation of a Province

In 1883, a Canadian Pacific Railway crew, attempting to drill for water 40 miles west of Medicine Hat, struck natural gas. Seven years later the first commercial well was established to supply the town of Medicine Hat. Coal was being mined in the Crowsnest Pass and many small sawmills were opening. Economic growth, through the sale of Alberta's abundant natural resources, played an important role in convincing Ottawa of Alberta's potential.

Successive Members of the North-West Territories Assembly continually urged Ottawa to grant provincial status to the west. In 1904, Sir Wilfrid Laurier agreed to the request, and in 1905 the House of Commons passed the *Alberta Act* and the *Saskatchewan Act*. The *Calgary Herald* echoing general feeling about the event commented: "The people of

the Territories will hail with delight the fact that they are to receive at last some measure of self-government, though the terms and conditions as announced will create great disappointment in any event as regards the boundaries and the retaining of the public lands by the Dominion."

One other decision concerning the creation of a province had sparked considerable interest in the west: the location of a provincial capital. Calgary and Edmonton were both considered front-runners, but other sites such as Red Deer and Banff were also bidding for the honour. Calgary had the advantage of a greater population, and greater economic wealth and yet had the greatest liability in that it had elected a Conservative MP in 1904. Edmonton claimed to be the geographic centre, but its primary advantage was the fact that it had elected two very powerful Liberals, Frank Oliver and Peter Talbot, in that same election. Suffice it to say that Edmonton was named the provisional capital, with a permanent site to be chosen by the 25 Members of Alberta's first Legislature.

During this time, one of Edmonton's leading Liberal lawyers, A.C. Rutherford, was appointed Premier until Ottawa officially divided Alberta into constituencies. Edmontonian Frank Oliver was responsible for the division, which, clearly favoured northern Alberta, particularly Edmonton.

Alberta's first provincial election was called for November 9, 1905, with A.C. Rutherford's Liberal Party winning 23 of the 25 seats. On March 15, 1906, Lieutenant Governor George Bulyea addressed a crowd of 4,000 at Edmonton's Thistle Curling Rink, officially beginning Alberta's first session of the Legislative Assembly. As part of the business for the day, Charles Fisher, MLA for Cochrane, was elected Speaker.

The ceremonies over, the government moved to McKay Avenue School, the only suitable site in the City of Edmonton to handle the session.

The first session of the Legislature dealt with many items ranging from setting speed limits for motor vehicles (maximum 20 mph) to the creation of the University of Alberta. Edmonton was chosen provincial capital, and a site on the banks of the North Saskatchewan River overlooking Fort Edmonton was selected as the location of the new Legislature Building.

By 1909, Rutherford was prepared to go back to the polls campaigning on a platform of good government. Primarily aided by the expansion of the railway system, Rutherford's government had guaranteed over \$25 million to various railway companies involving 1,761 miles of track.

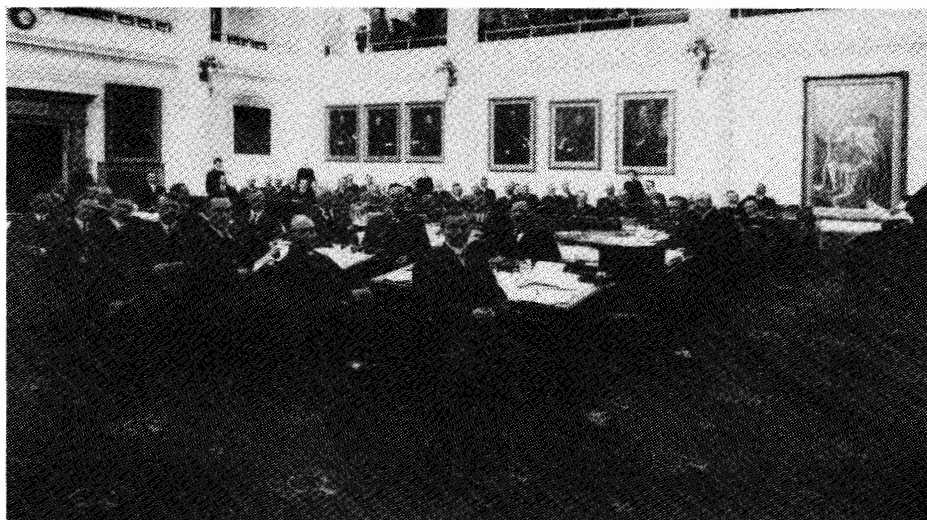
With the support of the newly formed United Farmers of Alberta, Rutherford was re-elected to power with 37 of the 41 seats. Elected to lead the opposition was a young Calgary lawyer, R.B. Bennett, who immediately questioned the legitimacy of Rutherford's railway guarantees. Several of his

ministers were forced to resign, and in 1910 Rutherford himself resigned and was replaced by Arthur Sifton, the Chief Justice.

Sifton continued the policy of railway bond guarantees despite the scandal and, to his credit, was able to placate the large rural portions of the population and lead the Liberal Party to victory in 1913. Prior to the election, with pomp and ceremony befitting the occasion, the new Legislature Building was officially opened by the Duke of Connaught on September 3, 1912.

When war broke out in August of 1914, Albertans greeted the news with mixed emotions. Many recent immigrants were indifferent, others were sympathetic, and most believed they would not be affected. However, over the next five years the war became a focal point in the economic, social, and political growth of the province.

Spurred on by church groups and emerging women's



The Second Alberta Legislative Assembly (1913)

organizations, women were called upon to play a more active role in society. Spearheaded by five Alberta women (Nellie McClung, Emily Murphy, Louise McKinney, Irene Parlby, and Henrietta Muir Edwards), women were finally given the right to vote in 1916.

Alberta women exercised this right in June of 1917 when Arthur Sifton won another mandate. Fundamentalist ideas resulted in the appearance of the Non-Partisan League, an agrarian-based political movement which was able to get two candidates elected. Particularly noteworthy was the fact that for the first time in either a Canadian or British Assembly, women were elected to serve as Members. Nursing Sister Roberta McAdams, an armed services representative, and Mrs. Louise McKinney, representing the Non-Partisan League in the Claresholm constituency, won seats in the Legislative Assembly.

Soon after the election, Arthur Sifton resigned to become a Member of the Union Government in Ottawa, and Charles Stewart took over the leadership of the Liberal Party. Falling

grain prices and the inability to finance all the proposed irrigation projects in southern Alberta resulted in waning support for the Liberals. By 1921, farmers were looking for someone who would better represent their interests. They settled on a farmer, Robert Greenfield, who led the United Farmers of Alberta party (NFA) to a sweeping victory, winning 39 of 61 seats thus beginning a period of 50 years where neither of the so-called mainline parties would be in power.

Greenfield appointed a lawyer in his cabinet, J.E. Brownlee, as Attorney General, and four years later Brownlee became Premier when members of cabinet switched their allegiance. Brownlee was a popular leader, able to mesh together the UFA philosophy of a farmer-class government with the realities of a well-run government. He swept the election in 1926, winning 43 of 61 seats.

The '20s were exciting years in Alberta. Southern

Albertans had oil fever. Radio arrived in 1922 and soon after evangelists began preaching their gospels. One such program was hosted by a Calgary high school principal, William Aberhart. Aberhart's "Radio Sunday Program" was so popular that by the early 1930s it was carried by radio stations across western Canada and the United States.

Aberhart decided to move into the political arena under the banner of Social Credit which promised, among other things, to give all citizens \$25 a month in credit during the depression. Working through the Prairie Bible Institute and with his trusted colleague, Ernest Manning, Aberhart organized Social Credit study groups across the province.

With the depression having literally destroyed thousands of lives, Albertans were looking for answers. The UFA was unable to provide them. To add to this, Premier Brownlee, in a case that captured headlines throughout the country, was charged with the seduction of a young legal secretary. Brownlee was forced to resign and his Provincial Treasurer,

Dick Reid, became Premier. His term was shortlived, for in 1935, Aberhart led the Social Credit Party to victory.

Aberhart discovered that the implementation of his brand of Social Credit would not be easy. Over the course of the next four years, the Supreme Court of Canada declared *ultra vires* several Bills basic to the implementation of the Social Credit platform. In addition, hoping to control hostile press coverage, the government introduced the *Accurate News and Information Act*, a Bill which would require newspapers to publish statements correcting or amplifying any stories related to government policy. The Bill was passed by the Assembly but was refused Royal Assent.

Bitter infighting among the caucus over Aberhart's inability to follow-up on campaign promises marred his early years. In 1940, Aberhart was returned but with a significantly smaller majority. After his death in 1943, Ernest Manning was selected party leader and Premier.

The Manning years, from 1943 to 1968, can be characterized as years in which the province's economic growth was efficiently managed. The discovery of oil near Leduc in 1947 proved to be the catalyst for the development of an energy-based infrastructure which is equally important today.

The effect of the discovery was dramatic. Less than two and one-half decades later Alberta's population doubled to 1.6 million. Spurred on by the massive Leduc discovery, the pace of exploration accelerated and proved fruitful throughout the province. Both Calgary and Edmonton benefitted, although Calgary, with its history intertwined with the oil patch, ultimately became the centre of the oil community.

Oil provided Premier Manning with the capital he needed to meet the demands of the province's growing population. Hospitals, senior citizen lodges, provincial buildings and schools were constructed at an impressive pace. He led the party to six straight election wins, usually with massive majorities.

Because of his dominant leadership, there was no obvious "heir apparent" for the Social Credit Party. With the backing of Manning's son and other influential Social Crediters, Harry Strom, a former Minister of Agriculture and Municipal Affairs, won a second ballot victory over four other contenders. Strom inherited a well-run government, somewhat aged but nevertheless effective. Opposition came from the Leader of the Progressive Conservative Party, E. Peter Lougheed. Using modern technology and professional media relations, Lougheed defeated Strom in the election campaign in 1971. Lougheed did not argue the effectiveness of the government, but instead presented a new and vigorous alternative.

Lougheed spearheaded a convincing Progressive Conservative win and remained Premier of the province for the next 15 years. The Lougheed years brought Alberta to the



The present Lieutenant-Governor, Helen Hunley

forefront in national affairs. His input in constitutional and economic matters are well remembered. The creation of the Alberta Heritage Savings Trust Fund, economic growth (particularly in international trade), and the creation of extensive health and social service facilities and programs highlighted his tenure. His appointment of Helen Hunley to cabinet was the first time a woman would hold a portfolio in Executive Council; and his appointment of Ralph Steinhauer, a full treaty Indian, as Lieutenant Governor was another first. Unprecedented growth in the oil and gas industry enabled the economy to grow and diversify. At the same time continuous support for the agricultural sector resulted in steady growth.

Lougheed retired in 1985 and was succeeded by Don Getty, one of the "original six" Conservatives from the 1967 election, as leader of the Progressive Conservatives and Premier. In 1986 the provincial election resulted in the election of a large (by Alberta standards) opposition consisting of 16 New Democrats, four Liberals, and two Representatives. The Progressive Conservatives won the 61 remaining seats.

In March of this year, Don Getty led the Progressive Conservatives to victory at the polls taking 59 of 83 seats. The New Democrats, led by Ray Martin, reconfirmed their status as Official Opposition winning by 16 seats. The Liberals won the remaining 8 seats. In the general election, however, the Premier lost his seat of Edmonton-Whitemud, but subsequently won a by-election in the Stettler constituency.

In their relatively short history Albertans have exhibited a political dynamism and independence that makes them unique among Canada's provinces. ■